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DIVISION OF
NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS

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LIBYAN SPONGE FISHING AND MEASURES
TO REDUCE EXCESSIVE MORTALITY

By: American Consul

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Production: Sponge fishing in coastal waters is an industry of considerable importance in Libya, most of it being carried on off Derna in Cirenaica. The following table relates to the catch during the 1937 season.

	<u>Kilograms</u>	<u>Lire</u>
Fine sponges	202	18,180
"Horse" sponges	13,234	1,186,860
"Zemoche" sponges	10,338	849,574
Sponge scraps, etc.	<u>6,623</u>	<u>104,676</u>
Totals:	<u>30,397</u>	<u>2,159,290</u>

The sponge fishing season is a short one, lasting from April through the fall months and nearly all the last season's catch was shipped to Egypt for the bleaching necessary to fit it for the market.

In the past the fishing was carried on almost exclusively by Greeks but of late years^{by} Dodecanese from Rhodes, and other islands in the same general region. Thirty four boats equipped with diving apparatus engaged in this fishing last year, of which 29 of Egyptian and only 5 of Greek registry. All the divers were Dodecanese.

There has always been a heavy loss of life and excessively numerous cases of disability among the sponge fishermen and the occupation has been justly regarded as highly hazardous. With the declared purpose of reducing the loss of life and the hazards involved the Italian government issued a decree on April 12, 1937, No. 1764 designed to discipline sponge fishing operations whenever carried on within Italian

jurisdiction.

jurisdiction. Whether any undisclosed and ulterior purpose was involved the writer ~~does~~ not know.

The heaviest casualties have always been borne by the actual divers and the Italians maintain that most of them have been avoidable, and due to the ignorance of the boats' skippers and crews and to defective equipment. Too often the divers are let into deeper water than they can stand, left under too long, hauled up too quickly, or the air lines are bungled. Death or paralysis is the frequent result in such instances and to this should be added much suffering due to ignorance of the proper methods of avoiding or alleviating diver's cramp i.e. "bends".

The cited decree provides that in order to captain a sponge fishing vessel the skipper, in addition to being duly registered as a class 1 or 2 seaman, must have served not less than a 5 years apprenticeship on a sponge fishing vessel. The passing of an examination is also made obligatory, the scope being: handling of the vessel, conducting of the fishing operations proper, first aid, etc. The personnel whose job it is to handle the lines and respiratory equipment must also qualify by an examination in the form of a practical demonstration of their competency. The use of knotted lines in lowering the diver is made obligatory - to avoid too deep submersion and too sudden changing of pressure. The maximum depth of submersion is fixed by the decree, as well as the maximum period of submersion. Medical examinations are made obligatory, standards of equipment are fixed and equipment inspections provided for. Finally, alimentation

of divers and crews, and contract relations are regulated by the law.

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Information sources:

Cited decree and Tripoli press.

Copy to Embassy.
" " Commercial Attaché.

Central File: Decimal File 865C.628, Internal Affairs Of States, Animal Husbandry., Libya, Fisheries., no date. n.d. MS European Colonialism in the Early 20th Century. National Archives (United States). Archives Unbound, link.gale.com/apps/doc/FSC5109726885/FGDSC%3Fu%3Domni%26sid%3Dbbookmark-GDSC. Accessed 18 June 2025.